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Ironie in perspectief

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Document Version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:

1991

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Jongbloed, B. H. (1991). *Ironie in perspectief: aard en ontwikkeling van de verbale ironie in de handschriftelijke versies van Vestdijks 'Sint Sebastiaan' en in de daarmee corresponderende gedeelten van die van 'Kind tussen vier vrouwen'*. s.n.

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Summary

The phenomenon of irony can be divided into two categories: verbal irony and situational irony. Naturally distinct from situational irony, only verbal irony will be dealt with in this study.

Irony has been approached from various angles: from the points of view of phenomenology, rhetoric and pragmatics. The objective of this study benefits most from a structuralist and semiotic approach. This objective is: investigating the nature and development of irony in the successive stages of (part of) *Kind tussen vier vrouwen* (*Kind*) and *Sint Sebastiaan* (*StSeb*), the latter being 'extracted' from the former novel; thus, we are concerned with that part of *Kind* that is similar to *StSeb* with respect to content.

This objective originates from the reader's experience that *StSeb* is far richer in irony than *Kind*. Another experience in reading these novels is that the narrative situation in *StSeb* is more varied than in *Kind*, in the sense that the psychological distance between the narrator and the main actor, Anton Wachter, (for structuralist reasons the term 'actor' is to be preferred to 'character'), is more varied in the former novel than in the latter. Because of this difference in variety between the two narratives, manifesting itself in the degree of linkage of the points of view, irony was described in terms of the narrative point of view. Thus, the secondary objective of this study was to develop a typology of discourse.

Taking Jonathan Culler's work as a methodical starting-point because of the unique position Culler ascribes to the literary work as the most complex structure, the structuralist and semiotic approach to irony implies that our attention will be primarily focussed on those aspects of irony that lend themselves to an analytical description. As the moral and spiritual aspects of irony receive ample attention, in particular in phenomenology, they should be largely left aside here. Nevertheless, the following aspects will be dealt with: a. the participants in the ironic communication: the ironist, the victim of irony and the observer, whether he is meant to be one or not; b. the signal of irony and its active context. For further illustration of the term irony, Preisendanz's description has been chosen, although not without reservation: 'Ironie besteht in einer irreführenden Aussage, die durch bestimmte sprachliche Signale, durch ihren gedanklichen Kontext oder durch ihr Verhältnis zur Situation den Hörer oder Leser auffordert, das Falsche ins eigentlich Gemeinte zurückzuübersetzen.'

Of the various typologies of narration (and of discourse) that have been developed during the last few decades, those used in structuralism and semiotics here again prove to be most useful for the secondary objective. Once more Culler's theory serves as a methodical basis. It is especially Culler's view on the position the literary work occupies within culture as such, in particular the relationship between author, text and

reader, which leads us to reject the idea of implied author (or ideal author) and ideal reader.

Within the literary work we can distinguish two layers, the story and the narrative, roughly to be described as 'content' and 'form', or, semiotically, as significance and signifier. For a third layer, that of the focalisator, there is no semiotic basis, so that this layer has no right to exist. Doležel has suggested a hierarchy for the functions of the agents belonging to the two layers: actors belong to the layer of the story only, the narrator belongs to both the layer of the story and that of the narrative. The functional opposition between narrator and actors is always preserved, notwithstanding Doležel's view that it is possible for the two agents to take over each other's primary functions.

The typology of discourse to be developed is based on Lintvelt's typology of narration. The latter has been derived from the following variables: a. is the story narrated by an agent that also functions as actor or by an agent that does not have that function? The former is called 'homodiegetic narration', the latter 'heterodiegetic narration'; b. are events observed by the narrator or by an actor, or do they appear to be registered by a neutral camera? Combinations of these possibilities yield the following types of narration: homodiegetic-authorial narration, homodiegetic-actorial narration; heterodiegetic-authorial narration, heterodiegetic-actorial narration and heterodiegetic-neutral narration. The criteria of narrative show how, within these types of narration, the categories of narrative observation – time, space and wording – take shape. For the present study of irony, the criteria with respect to the categories observation and wording are of primary importance. As for observation, two aspects should be paid special attention to: a. the position of the point of view and b. the scope of observation, which, in that order, are to be described as: the point within the narrative from which events are observed and: the maximum of knowledge of the narrative reality an agent can have on account of his position in the narrative. In the case of irony, the subject of observation, the agent having the point of view, acts as the ironist; the object of observation, the perspectified, is not necessarily one victim of irony seen by one observer. The category of wording is also important to an analysis of irony: after all, irony is based on language. In Lintvelt's conception, wording is the final result of the choice of point of view with respect to position. For the reader-analyst, however, the process runs in reverse order: by means of the visible final result, the wording, he can discover with which agent the point of view is placed and who is/are the perspectified. For a system that takes wording as a starting-point, Lintvelt is less suitable therefore; the theories of discourse developed by Doležel and Bronzwaer are more to the point. However, these theories are perfectly compatible with Lintvelt's theory of narration.

Any narrative text consists of so-called 'narrator discourse' and 'actor discourse'. Actor discourse is any text showing an actor's direct involvement, be it in terms of sensations, observations, thoughts or views, often rendered in that particular actor's appropriate idiom. In the case of actor discourse, the point of view is placed with the actor concerned; otherwise we are dealing with narrator discourse, the point of view being placed with the narrator. Actor discourse is reported by the narrator in terms of direct speech, indirect speech or free indirect style. The latter two forms should be

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considered transpositions of the first, which is the purest form of actor discourse. Violations of the transposition rules by the narrator can be regarded as signals for the addition of narrator discourse to actor discourse. In the composite discourse thus created (merging the actor's and narrator's points of view), actor discourse is very often meant to accompany critically the views etc. it contains. In such cases, this criticism generally manifests itself in the form of irony, the narrator being the ironist and the victim of irony the actor whose discourse is at issue. Composite discourse (interference of discourse) can also originate when the above-mentioned role of the narrator is assumed by an actor. Another way to create composite discourse is by incorporating – usually in a veiled way – an actor's direct speech into the narrator's discourse, or an actor's direct speech into another actor's discourse. Here too, its function is usually to comment critically or ironically on a view contained in the actor discourse that has been incorporated. On the basis of these analyses, Lintvelt's category of wording can take shape in a typology of discourse.

A classification of irony starting from this typology of discourse yields the various types of irony. A type of irony can be described as a combination of the agent acting as ironist and the type of discourse by means of which he expresses irony. Thus N(N)-irony means that the narrator is ironical by means of his own discourse, N(A/N)-irony that the narrator is ironical by means of composite discourse based on the manipulation of transposition rules with regard to forms of speech, N(N+A)-irony that the narrator is ironical with respect to the actor whose discourse has been incorporated into his own N-discourse; A(A)-irony means: an actor being ironical by means of his own discourse, A1(A2/A1)-irony: an actor being ironical with regard to another actor whose form of speech has been manipulated, and so on.

Not all agents have a comparable number of possibilities to realize their ironic intentions. Thus, an actor can only express his ironic intentions by means of (his own) actor discourse, whereas the narrator is able to use his own discourse or that of an actor. In the latter case, e.g. V(A)irony, the narrator does not add to the actor's words, because they themselves are able to shed an ironic light on the speaker. This difference in possibilities between narrator and actor is due to the conventional hierarchy between the two agents.

The simple outline of types of irony that could be drawn on the basis of the assumptions mentioned above, is substantially complicated by two conditions: a. sometimes an ironist is himself ironized by another agent; b. for certain cases of irony, only the author can be held responsible. Cases as mentioned under (a) occur when, for example, the narrator ironizes an actor on account of the latter's not (quite) successful attempt at irony, in the narrator's view, that is; the ironist is being ironized in his irony. Such a subtype of irony is, for example, N{A1(A1+A2)}-irony: the actor A1 ironizes a view of actor A2 by incorporating the latter's discourse in direct speech (indirectly) into his own discourse; the narrator, however, feels that A1's attempt has failed and, in his turn, ironizes A1. Instead of the narrator, an actor (A3) can act as ironist. On the basis of these conditions, subtypes of irony must be distinguished in addition to types of irony. Further ironizing is possible in theory, but in practice it is nearly out of the question: it would be incomprehensible to any reader. Author irony as mentioned under (b) must be presumed when certain narrative

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conventions appear to have been violated, when the reader is supplied with information unknown to narrator and actors, or when a narrator expresses himself in such a way that he, unwittingly, ironizes himself. Although, conventionally speaking, the author is unable to occur in a story with his own idiom, we should sometimes allow for the occurrence of author discourse in the story. This author discourse can only be described in terms of author irony. The restricted number of possible ironists (actor, narrator, author) and the practical limitation of 'ironized irony' imply a closed system of (sub)types of irony.

The selection and description of sources relevant to this research has taken place with close reference to views that are current within the historical-critical editing of texts. *Kind* is represented by two complete manuscripts, each of them containing revisions, *StSeb* by a complete manuscript, an almost complete typescript, both containing revisions, and the first printed version, a publication in the periodical *Groot Nederland*. Since the scope of this study does not permit complete description of all cases of irony in both novels, a restrictive though representative selection has been made from the material: a more or less self-contained part of the story, the thematic 'accumulation' of irony with regard to a particular phenomenon and the thematic 'accumulation' of irony with reference to an actor.

It is essential that the criteria for pointing out ironic intentions and making them plausible should be used as explicitly and consistently as possible. This is especially important in autobiographical novels, like the ones at issue, which are covered beforehand by a 'veil of irony' because of the circumstance that an adult narrator matches himself against a youthful protagonist.

How do we determine the nature and development of the irony used? As for its nature: this will only be expressed in terms of types of irony; other possibilities, such as the way of indicating irony, – see for example Preisendanz's description, mentioning three modes of indicating irony – will not be used because they would affect the clarity of the classification principle chosen. When examining the development of irony we can distinguish a quantitative and a qualitative aspect. The former does not cause many difficulties: it is based on number, on the number of times that irony has been found in a particular version of one of the novels. The latter does cause problems since the term quality is ambiguous. One meaning of quality which is expressed in terms like 'good', 'bad', 'beautiful' and 'ugly' is of course not suitable for a structural-analytical approach: it depends too much on personal feelings and situations. This meaning of quality can be called subjective quality. The other meaning, the objective one, refers to the nature of things. With respect to irony, the objective quality can be described structurally in terms of the aspects 'type of irony' and 'signal of irony'. The signal of irony is examined for its nature and its intensity. Its nature will be described according to Preisendanz's modes – but, as was said before, not as a criterion for classification, but as 'proof' of irony, as a sort of auxiliary construction. The intensity of the signal of irony indicates to what extent the ironist makes his intentions explicit. By making use of the intensity of the signal of irony, the analyst has a more sophisticated instrument at his disposal to attend to the development of irony. He need not restrict himself to establishing whether or not something is a case

of irony but he disposes of quite a number of means of differentiation which prove to do justice to Vestdijk's usage in *Kind* and *StSeb*.

Since any form of analysis inevitably affects the unique effect of each separate instance of irony, a different term from the word 'irony' is preferable when referring to the results of the analysis; it is better to speak of ironic potential: the analysis provides information on the basis of which a reader has the possibility to interpret a textual excerpt ironically.

The results of this research can be summarized as follows:

- a. nearly all irony is N-irony; it manifests itself by means of simple N-discourse and A-discourse as well as by means of composite discourse, A/N-discourse and (N+A)-discourse; thus, there is N(N)-irony, N(A)-irony, N(A/N)-irony and N(N+A)-irony. Of these types of irony, N(N)-irony is by far the most frequent.
- b. the ironic potential increases steadily from the first version of *Kind* up to the last version of *StSeb* used in this study; the most important increase is to be found in the first version of *StSeb*.
- c. the ironic potential based on composite discourse shows a clearly greater increase than that based on simple discourse.
- d. the increase in ironic potential based on composite discourse sets in sooner (already within the versions of *Kind*) than that based on simple discourse; that which is based on N-discourse occurs almost completely within the versions of *StSeb*.
- e. the intensity of the signal of irony also increases substantially from the first version of *Kind* to the last version of *StSeb* used in this study; an absolute climax here is not the first version of *StSeb*, as under (b), but the second one, that is to say the revised stage of that first version.
- f. however, this sharp increase in intensity of the signal of irony in the second version of *StSeb* can almost completely be attributed to the N(N)- and the N(A/N)-types of irony, the two types of irony which are more intensified than the N(A) type and the N(N+A) type during all stages of development anyhow.
- g. Vestdijk tends not to remove irony from an originally ironic passage; if irony is lost during the development of a text, this is due to his leaving out a passage altogether rather than to his just removing irony from that passage; conversely, Vestdijk easily creates irony in a passage which was originally without irony.
- h. N(N)-irony and N(A/N)-irony more easily originate from passages without irony than N(A)-irony and N(N+A)-irony, but are also more easily changed back again.

Finally an attempt should be made to place the results of this research in a broader perspective. Two questions are central: a. can the increase in ironic potential found in this study be accounted for? b. can the ironic attitude of the author be traced back to any source?

Besides the possible relation of the increase in ironic potential to Vestdijk's growing craftsmanship as a writer and to the substitution of the term 'chronicle' in *Kind* by 'history' in *StSeb*, which offered Vestdijk more technical possibilities peculiar to the novel, the function of the 'Introduction' (*Intr.*) in *Kind* is a central issue. This *Intr.* consists of a number of pages which are not so much part of the history of Anton Wachter, told in chronological order. Rather, they are a sort of 'blueprint' for the way in which the reader should look upon the relationship between the narrator and

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Anton Wachter in *Kind*. The *Intr.* gives an account of a process of reminiscence and identification resulting in a partial merging of the narrator and Anton Wachter, his youthful alter ego. This process of merging is by no means a smooth one; the narrator shows a strong inclination as well as all sorts of inhibitions. It can be stated that the relationship between narrator and Anton Wachter has been established in *Kind* by the nature and accompanying symptoms of the process taking place in the *Intr.* As the distance between the narrator and Anton in *Kind* is great as compared to that in *StSeb*, *Kind* apparently needs such an introduction to put the reader on the right track of interpretation; in *StSeb*, where the distance between the narrator and Anton is far smaller, such an introduction is not necessary; indeed, here the manifest irony is often needed to enlarge this distance somewhat.

Another possible explanation for leaving out an introduction in *StSeb* may be found in the example set by authors connected with the periodical *Forum*, especially Du Perron and Ter Braak, whom Vestdijk held in high esteem. They were quick to call all attempts at true recollection of and consequent identification with one's early youth fruitless. Moreover, the *Intr.* can be seen as the psychological counterpart of Anton's natural birth as described in *StSeb*.

Since *Kind* and *StSeb* are autobiographical novels, it is justified to assume a relationship between the views developed in these novels, in particular by the narrator, and those expressed by Vestdijk himself. His essays, in particular *Het eeuwige telaat*, *Dialogen over de tijd*, *De toekomst der religie* and *Het wezen van de angst*, present a view of his own youth which make the way in which Vestdijk describes the relationship between the narrator and Anton Wachter in *Kind* and *StSeb* very understandable. The period of his youth is seen as a paradise lost forever, a blissful period in man's life never to be regained; one can, indeed, one must persist in trying to recapture it, but one will never completely and lastingly succeed. Only irony makes living with this truth endurable.

Because narrator and author have merged into one, not in a formal sense but in a material one, the narrator irony in *Kind* and *StSeb* is ultimately also author irony, albeit different from the author irony discussed above: in *Kind* and *StSeb* it can not be inferred from the text itself; external information is indispensable for one to be able to interpret this as author irony.